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AUTHOR Morais, Anne
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ABSTRACT

The Skills and Knowledge Profile (SKP) is a tool developed in Canada to document learning styles and strategies of adult learners. The instrument was developed as a systematic approach to capturing the learning styles of unemployed and employed adults across sectors. It is made up of these six sections: (1) Learning Access and Personal Information; (2) Personal Informal Learning; (3) Job-Related Informal Learning; (4) Non-Formal Courses and Workshops; (5) Future Learning Plans; and (6) Your Comments on the Profile. The SKP was created through action-based research using learners in a unionized factory, community-based women's employment program, and community-based literacy program. Volunteers at all three sites committed their time and efforts to filling out the SKP and then provided feedback on the clarity, usefulness, and ease of using the tool. Feedback has been incorporated into the SKP in a continuous process. The evaluation can be used by individuals to sort out their skills and to focus their efforts on a career path. The SKP is not only a tool, but also a reflection of a positive trend in adult education by which adult learners build on and share their own

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wealth of knowledge and skills. (This paper documents the evolution of the SKP from its inception in the spring of 1997 to the end of 1998.) (KC)

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# Revolution of Experiences: Evolution of the Skills and Knowledge Profile
## NALL Working Paper

Anne Morais

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NALL Working Paper #34-2001

# Revolution of Experiences: Evolution of the Skills and Knowledge Profile

**Anne Morais**
**Independent Researcher. Toronto**
**with the assistance of**
**Karen Lior & D'Arcy Martin**

Prepared for "Learning Capacities in the Community and Workplace: An action research project" sponsored by Advocates for Community Based Training and Education for Women (ACTEW) and, initially, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers (CEP) Union. Funded by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board, National Literacy Secretariat, New Approaches to Lifelong Learning network at OISE, University of Toronto and the JUMP Project in British Columbia.

**the research network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning**

NALL

**Le Réseau de recherche sur les nouvelles approches de l'éducation permanente**

## Introduction

The obvious waste and humiliation involved in making people repeat education programs has led many Canadians to support the concept of PLAR, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition. In some academic institutions, this has taken the form of challenge exams, simply allowing an applicant to take an exam without having to sit through the course. For others, a more complex process is needed, to compile a portfolio of evidence of past learning, which can then be assessed. Portfolio development is an accepted course today in many community colleges, and often involves 30 hours of classroom time plus much preparation between classes. Similarly, computerized forms have been developed, which allow people to summarize their skills in a rapid and widely accessible format.

Each of these tools has its use, and we are not interested in tearing them down. However, they are not well suited for certain groups of adult learners. Importantly, many adults lack the confidence and recent exposure to material which would help them succeed in a challenge exam. Many lack the time needed for a full-scale portfolio development process. And many experience cognitive and financial barriers when dealing with computers. For a significant group of people, then, a new tool was needed, the Skills and Knowledge Profile.

The Skills and Knowledge Profile (SKP) is a tool intended to document learning styles and strategies of adult learners. Our goal was to develop a systematic approach to capturing the learning of unemployed and employed adults across sectors. In order to develop a user-friendly utilitarian SKP , we adopted an action based research method where we engaged learners in an unionized factory, community-based women's employment program and community-based literacy program. Volunteers in all the three sites committed their time and efforts to filling out the SKP and then provided us with feedback on the clarity, usefulness and ease of the tool. We have also received valuable feedback from workshop participants who have viewed selected sections of the SKP .The feedback has been insightful and clearly reflective of

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the learners , experiences and challenges. The incorporation of the feedback into the SKP has proven to be a subtle and continuous task.

The following paper documents the evolution of the SKP from its inception in the spring of '97 to the end of the '98. The SKP has travelled through the hands of learners in Ontario and British Colombia and workshop participants in Montreal and Toronto all of which have offered feedback that has made the final product significantly different than the original version. The SKP has experienced revisions on three fronts: the text and format of the SKP; the method by which it is administered; and the purpose of the SKP.

The original SKP was drafted by Beverly Burke who modelled it after the SKP developed for CEP union members at CBC. The SKP is made up of six sections plus an introduction explaining the research project.

- The Learning Access/Personal Information section asks for specific personal information like gender, age, race, level of education, languages spoken, etc.
- The Personal Informal Learning section asks people to describe the learning that takes place in their daily lives, through watching TV, reading, engaging in personal projects, or talking to people.
- The Job-Related Informal Learning section chronicles the job-related informal learning that specifically does not occur during job training.
- The Non-Formal Courses and Workshops section elicits a history of the individual's classroom learning that does not result in any sort of certification.
- The Future Learning Plans section asks individuals how they plan to apply their skills and experience, in combination with their desired training program and future life plans.
- The Your Comments on the Profile section solicits suggestions and revisions to the instrument from the learner.

**SKP's Text and Format**

The first SKP administered contained the following ordered sections: Section A-Personal Informal Learning; Section B- Job-Related Informal Learning; Section C-Non-Formal Courses and Workshops; Section D-Learning Access; Section E-Future Learning Plans; and Section F-Your Comments on the Profile. The volunteers were required to fill in their answers in a table. The following demonstrates the type of questions asked and the format in which it was presented for Section A- Personal Informal Learning:

| TYPE OF ACTIVITY | WHAT I DID | WHAT I LEARNED | HOW I LEARNED IT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family Work | | | |
| Volunteer Work | | | |
| Recreation and Hobbies | | | |
| Travel | | | |
| Independent Reading and Viewing | | | |
| Other (anything that does not fit in the areas above) | | | |

Before the learners filled in the tables, many examples were given and the questions were discussed to ensure clarity. The questions asked in sections A-C were all slightly different, but they were all presented on a table format. Questions in sections D-F were a combination of multiple choice and single answer questions.

The first group of learners to encounter the SKP was literacy students in a community centre in the West end of Toronto. Each learner was assisted by a tutor who helped them read the text and write the answers. In most cases, the tutors were interested in filling out their own SKP and so they did, in addition to coaching their students along. The session took much longer than the anticipated time

because we underestimated the amount of time literacy students need to write and the overwhelming nature of the endeavour.

The most striking reaction of the learners to the SKP was their confusion around the fluidity of the document. The volunteers were grappling with the relation of one section to the next: each section was challenging on its own and there was no feeling of successful progression as they moved through the document. It occurred to us that the reader needs to be eased into the SKP and the sections need to follow an order of least intimidating to more intimidating. Our primary mistake was to begin with Personal Informal Learning. For the purposes of this project, capturing adults' informal personal learning is by far the most relevant and interesting piece and we made the assumption that encouraging the learners to express their personal informal learning would be the most interesting for them as well. We realized that beginning a document with the seemingly most interesting section is not necessarily the best way to engage the readers.

We reordered the sections, changed some of the vocabulary , and made some questions more specific. The order of sections of the revised SKP was as follows: Section A-Personal Information; Section B-Courses or Workshops; Section C-Personal Informal Learning; Section D-Job-Related Informal Learning; Section E-Future Learning Plans; and Section F-Your comments on the Profile. The former section D entitled Learning Access became the new first section because it requests personal information which, we assumed, is a fairly innocuous section to complete. The title was changed because Learning Access does not clearly communicate to the reader what type of information the section is seeking. Courses or Workshops became the second section because it gives a common place from which all the learners can begin thinking about their own learning: they would all either be in a literacy class, employment program or union course. We decided to put the personal informal learning before the job-related informal learning because learning through personal projects does not exclude anyone whereas learning on the job excludes the temporarily unemployed, retired or never-employed individuals. Questions in the last two sections, Future Learning Plans and Your Comments on the Profile were broken down to specific questions in order to facilitate clarity.

Women in an employment program in downtown Toronto were the second group of volunteers to evaluate the usefulness and clarity of the SKP. Around the same time, participants in a workshop at the Canadian Labour Force Development Board Conference on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in Montreal surveyed the document. Three pivotal recommendations emerged from both groups. First, the learners felt that the table format restricts thought: it did not allow the reader to expand on any answer because the actual space is limited. There is the assumption that if more space was allotted for each answer, more creative or in-depth answers will emerge. Second, the list of categories under personal informal learning does not capture the spectrum of learning gained through personal projects or challenges. It was suggested to add a major events category which could include events that have taken place either in society, such as a depression, recession or a natural disaster, or in the personal life of the respondent, such as the birth of a child, death of a loved one, or the difficult process of immigration. Third, the vocabulary and sentence structure of the text crippled the clarity of the message. The text was not speaking to all the learners. As a response to the criticism, we refined the text to reach a greater number of learners. The following are two examples of the altered text. The sentence, "The information you provide will be anonymous," was changed to "No one will see your information." The sentences, "You researched where you wanted to go in Canada before you immigrated here. As a result, you learned research skills of gathering, compiling and analyzing information, not to mention all that knowledge you now have about Canadian cities," to "You got information about where you wanted to go in Canada before you came here. You used the skills of gathering compiling and analyzing information, not to mention all the knowledge you now have about Canadian cities."

The second revised SKP was starting to look radically different that the original version. Most tables were removed and replaced by line questions. For example, one category of the personal informal learning section appeared as follows:

Family Work

What I did: _____
What I learned: _____

How I learned it: _____

We were not prepared to completely forgo with the table format, so one remained in the Non- Formal Courses or Workshops section. The page was landscaped in order to increase the amount of writing space. Our intention was to ask the next group of learners which style they preferred, line questions or tables?

A few months later, a second group of women learners at the same employment program in downtown Toronto filled out the SKP and responded with their own strong recommendations. Rather than indicating a preference for lines over tables or tables over lines, the women argued that the best method of soliciting styles of learning is to provide multiple choice questions and to let the respondents choose among the options. This recommendation was then echoed by workshop participants at the Canadian Coalition for Community Based Training Conference in Toronto.

Our initial resistance to producing a multiple choice SKP was grounded in the notion that readers should independently reflect on his/her own learning. If all the options were laid out, the reader is not forced to examine a personal history of learning; rather, he/she can just go through the options and tick off answers. Our belief around independent reflection was convincingly challenged by the experiences of the learners. The learners argued that multiple choice questions serve to inspire thought and help to trigger memories of learning experiences that otherwise would not arise. In addition, the presence of particular options can validate certain experiences that the reader may have considered irrelevant or unimportant. For example, one may always be giving advice to his/her family and friends but yet does not believe that it is a valuable skill. By placing giving advice as one of the options under family work, the individual receives confirmation that it is certainly a skill worth valuing.

The multiple choice SKP then went to a group of literacy learners in a downtown Toronto community. The SKP was a struggle for the first group of literacy learners because of the labour of writing. The second group of literacy learners did not face the same challenges because of the new format. The multiple choice SKP did require some written answers but not nearly as many as the previous versions required. Recommendations from the literacy learners came in the way of multiple choice options which we had previously neglected to include.

The current final version of the SKP is neither final nor comprehensive as it can always be improved upon. However, since the tool had been shaped by the reactions and suggestions of adult learners, we feel it is approaching a user-friendly model that truly speaks to the experiences of learners.

**Method of Administering the SKP**

As the SKP instrument has experienced changes after each trial so to has the method of administering it changed. At the beginning of this study, we envisioned a group of learners sitting around a table with a beverage and a snack, each with a SKP in front them. A coach would be facilitating the exercise by introducing each section, explaining the purpose of each section and providing examples. The learners would independently fill out each section at a time, asking questions when needed. If a full group discussion arises, the coach would facilitate hoping to address everyone's inquiries. The union learners and the first group of literacy learners experienced the SKP in such a manner but the remaining volunteers did not.

One group of learners asked to take home a copy of the SKP in order to return to the group with a firm grasp of the document. We gave the learners the SKP to peruse and we all gathered one week later to fill it out. Some of the volunteers read it over during the week and came equipped with questions, other learners neglected to read it over, and others attempted to fill it out as a rough draft. It is neither significant nor credible to evaluate which reaction of three resulted in a more comprehensive SKP because each reaction is a reflection of a learning style, rather than the SKP instrument itself.

Two alternate methods of completing the SKP were suggested. First, a group discussion on skills and experiences could precede the exercise of filling out the SKP in order to encourage confidence and thought. And the second suggestion was around working in a strategy to consult friends and family to help the respondent focus on his/her skills and knowledge. One volunteer eloquently expressed this

position.

> I found it (filling out the SKP) very, for me personally, very hard to do, very difficult to do, it was gut wrenching at times and brought up a lot of stuff A document like this intimidates me and I have a hard time being honest. I agonize over it and it took me a really really long time to fill it out. And I would have liked to call everyone I know in the world to consult on the answer before I could put them down.

The second group of literacy learners completed the SKP in, yet, another method. On a one-to-one basis, I sat with each volunteer and went through the document while engaging in a relaxed discussion. Since we did not feel restricted by time, we allowed tangents to control our discussion, while habitually returning to the SKP. The free flowing discussion served to relax the respondents and alleviate the intimidating nature of the document. This method is not feasible with respect to resources and time, yet it does speak to certain types of learners.

We came to the conclusion that it is not relevant to be consistent in administering the SKP. An instrument intended to be employed across sectors of adult learners, does not need to adhere to one single method of implementation. The SKP should be portable, clear in expression, and engaging so to accommodate the needs and structures of different learning sites and learners.

**Potential Purposes of the SKP**

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) tends to be discussed in the context of skills training or upgrading related to employment. We continued that discussion by approaching learners in a community-based employment program working on upgrading their skills to enter or reenter the workforce. The same discussion endured by approaching unionized workers because they are interested in assessing their skills and knowledge to campaign for job laddering or pay increases. But we pushed the boundaries of the typical PLAR discussion by initiating it into community-based literacy centres that serve populations that are not interested in acquiring skills to secure employment. Many of the literacy learners were either retired or unable to work due to a disability and thus the SKP can serve a different role for them. In addition, the goal of the SKP took on another angle when it was discussed in the context of volunteer community agencies at the Trillium Conference entitled Investing in the Whole Community: Strategies for a Caring Society in Toronto, October 98.

The potential usages of the SKP are many. An individual can use the SKP to sort out his/her skills and knowledge before he/she embarks on writing a resume. One respondent said,

> I did say that it (SKP) should be done at the beginning of each resume writing course as it helped to point out my transferrable skills and I really believe that. Because I think everyone faces the same stress when writing a resume. Not that I would put most of these skills on my resume but it does open up your mind and it helps to introduce the mind set you need to write a resume.

The SKP can also prove useful for individuals who are hoping to find work but are not yet ready to write a resume. The exercise of recording one's skills and knowledge can boosts one's self esteem. One respondent said,

> For people who feel they have not where to go and feel kind of lost, I think it (SKP) can do wonders for their self esteem.

One respondent claimed that the SKP helped her identify her interests and skills which in turn helped her choose a career path.

> After filling it out I realized how many things I have done before that I never thought of. And now I am trying to look at and see what I really like, based on what is in here. Right now I am going to high school and I am kind of working toward what I really what to do, to be a chef. I want to go to George Brown College based on what is in here.

The SKP can help direct retirees to new hobbies or projects. Often, after individuals retire from working, their available free time increases and they start to look for new projects or hobbies. The SKP can serve to clarify where their interests lie.

The SKP can be useful for building a community skills bank/exchange. Individuals record their skills and knowledge, the information is classified in a database which is made available to its member. The members can then swap their skills. For example, John knows how to store preserves and helps Mary can her tomatoes and then Mary helps John redecorate his living room. In a time when community members have to rely on local resources, a skills bank assists the project.

Volunteer driven organizations rely on their volunteers to fulfill critical responsibilities. In order for the organization to run the most efficiently and make the best use of its human resources, the volunteers should fulfill duties that accurately reflect their skills, knowledge and interests. Especially in today's climate where people are working longer days or are required to take on additional caring responsibilities (such as caring for an elderly parent or a sick friend or family member), the need to maximize the available resources is heightened. The SKP can help such organizations classify the abilities and interests of its volunteers.

**Conclusion**

The SKP is not only a tool but a reflection of a positive trend in adult education. Adult learners enter the proverbial classroom to build on and share their own wealth of knowledge and skills. A user friendly SKP can legitimize and further one's prior learning. Based on the feedback from learners, the SKP we developed is a generic tool that has a strong potential to fulfill the needs of various work, community and education institutions.

No single tool can satisfy the legitimate hunger of adult learners for recognition of their accomplishments and capacities. Certainly, our learning about learning was far richer than the final text can capture. However, this tool is a lot more comprehensive and accessible than what we had at the beginning.

Our belief in action research is reinforced by the process we have undergone. By presenting learners with challenges rather than directives, we have been able to tap into their understanding and energy. Such collaborative and patient work, in grassroots settings will seem alien to advocates of a "quick fix" learning passport, in which one size is assumed to fit all. We have discovered the great richness and variety of settings for learning by adults not traditionally favoured in formal education programs. With this tool, we have tried to create space in which they can reclaim their rights as learners. We hope that by recording their past learning, they will be encouraged to continue, and that the educational and economic institutions will come on board to recognize the initiative and creativity which swirls around and beneath them.